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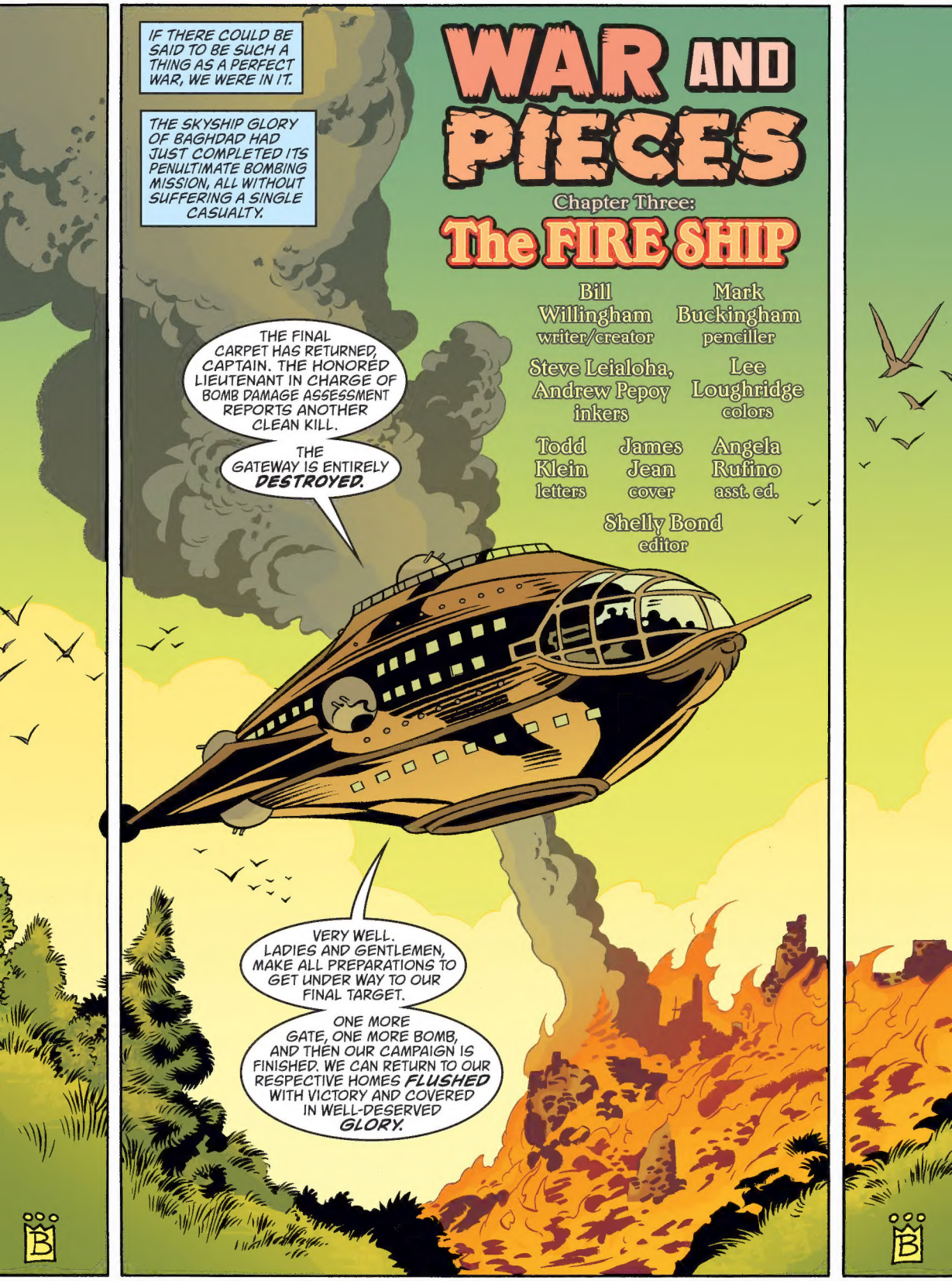
NO. 75

WILLINGHAM BUCKINGHAM LEIALOHA PEPOY

WAR & PIECES

PART THREE OF THREE


IF THERE COULD BE SAID TO BE SUCH A THING AS A PERFECT WAR, WE WERE IN IT.
THE SKYSHIP GLORY OF BAGHDAD HAD JUST COMPLETED ITS PENULTIMATE BOMBING MISSION, ALL WITHOUT SUFFERING A SINGLE CASUALTY.
WAR AND PIECES
Chapter Three:
The FIRE SHIP
Bill Willingham writer/creator
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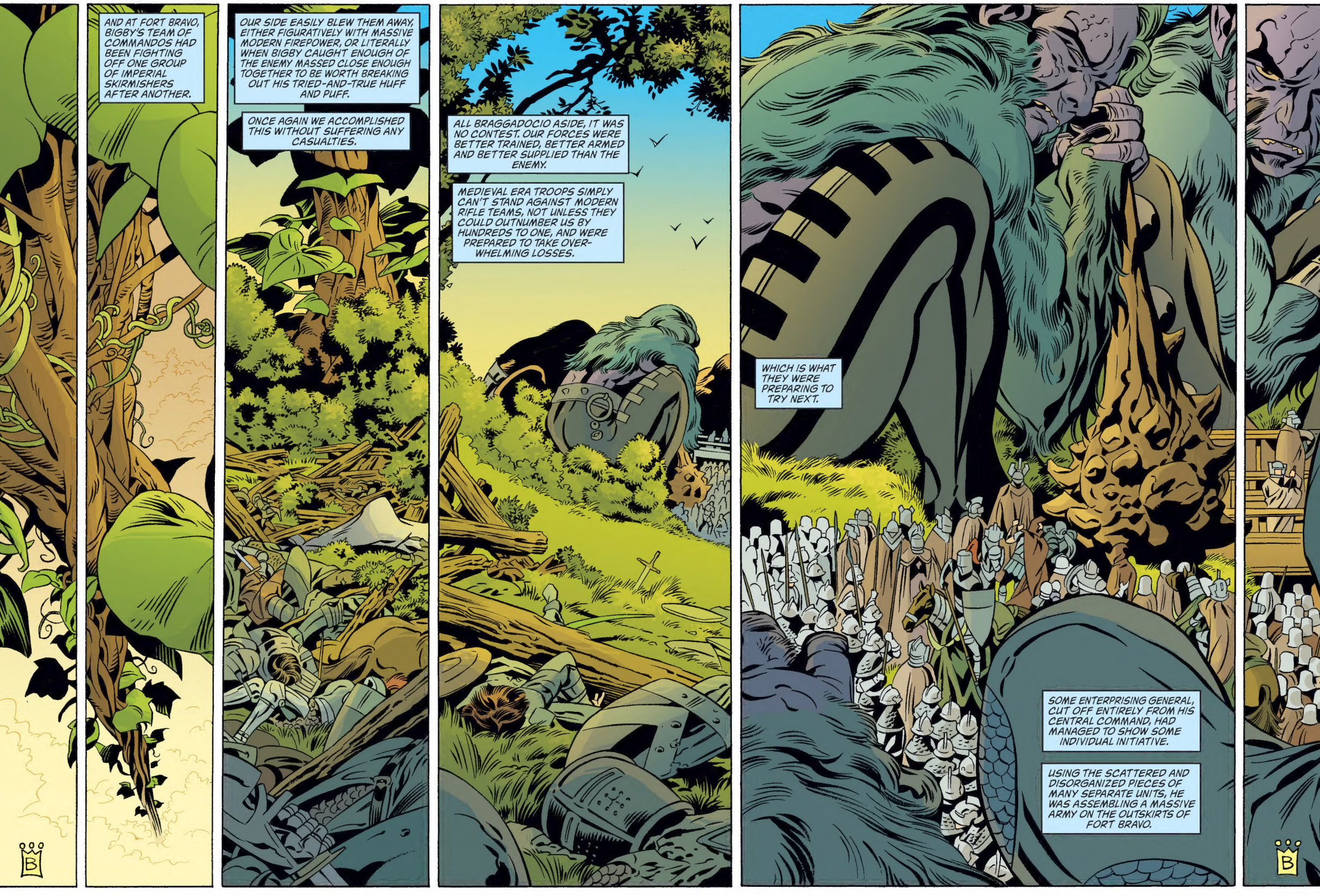
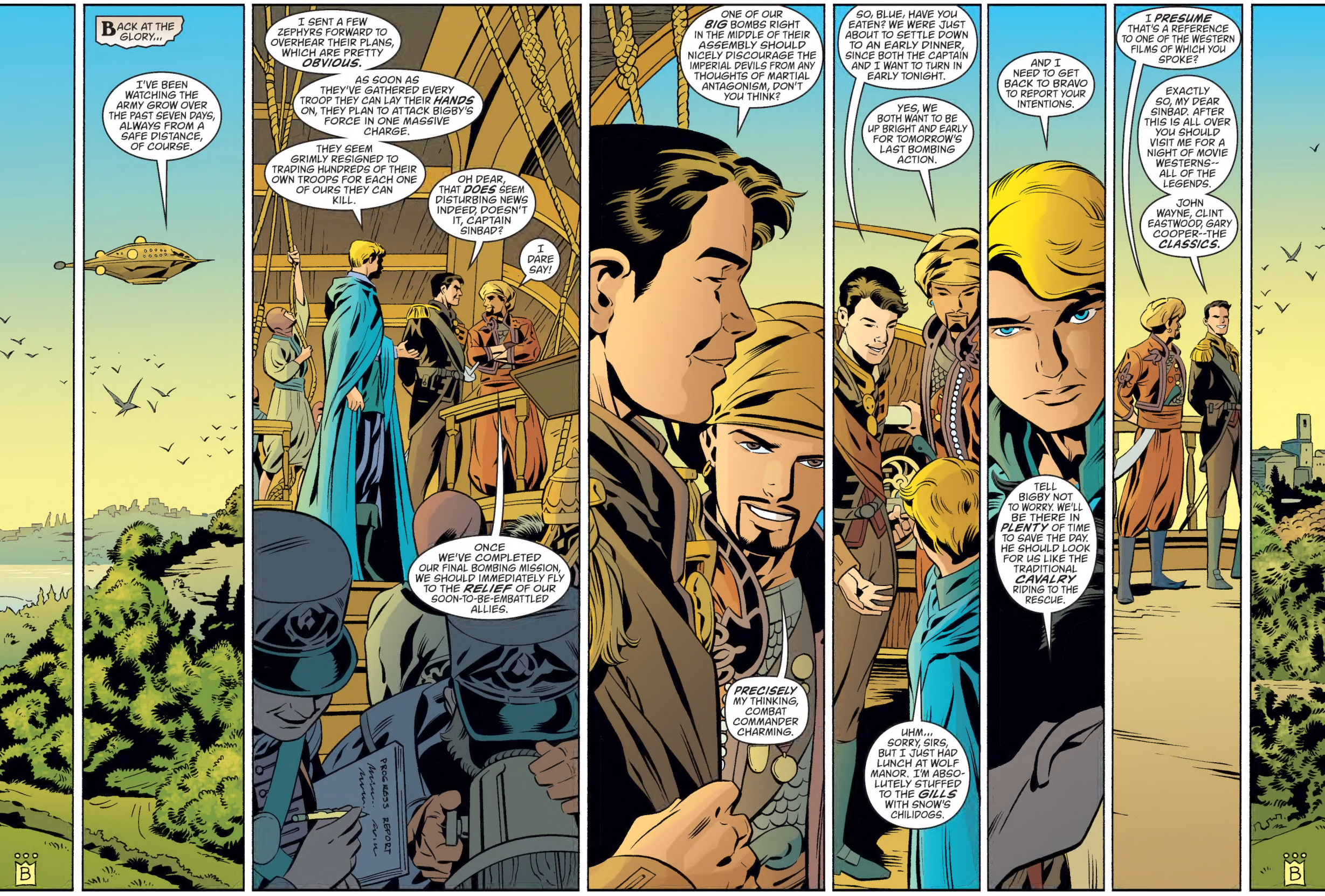
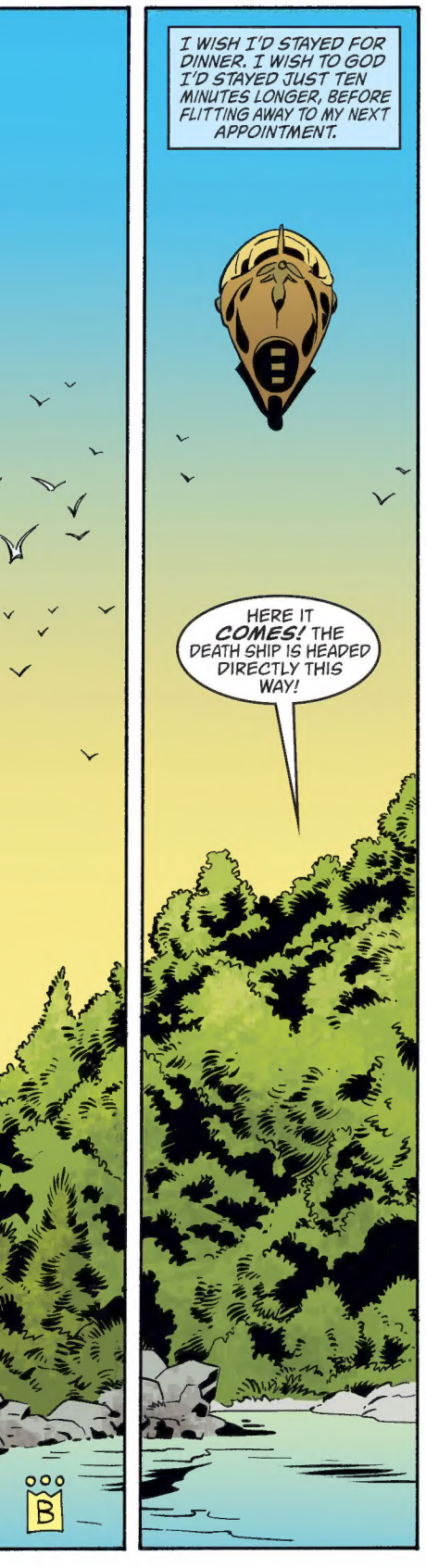
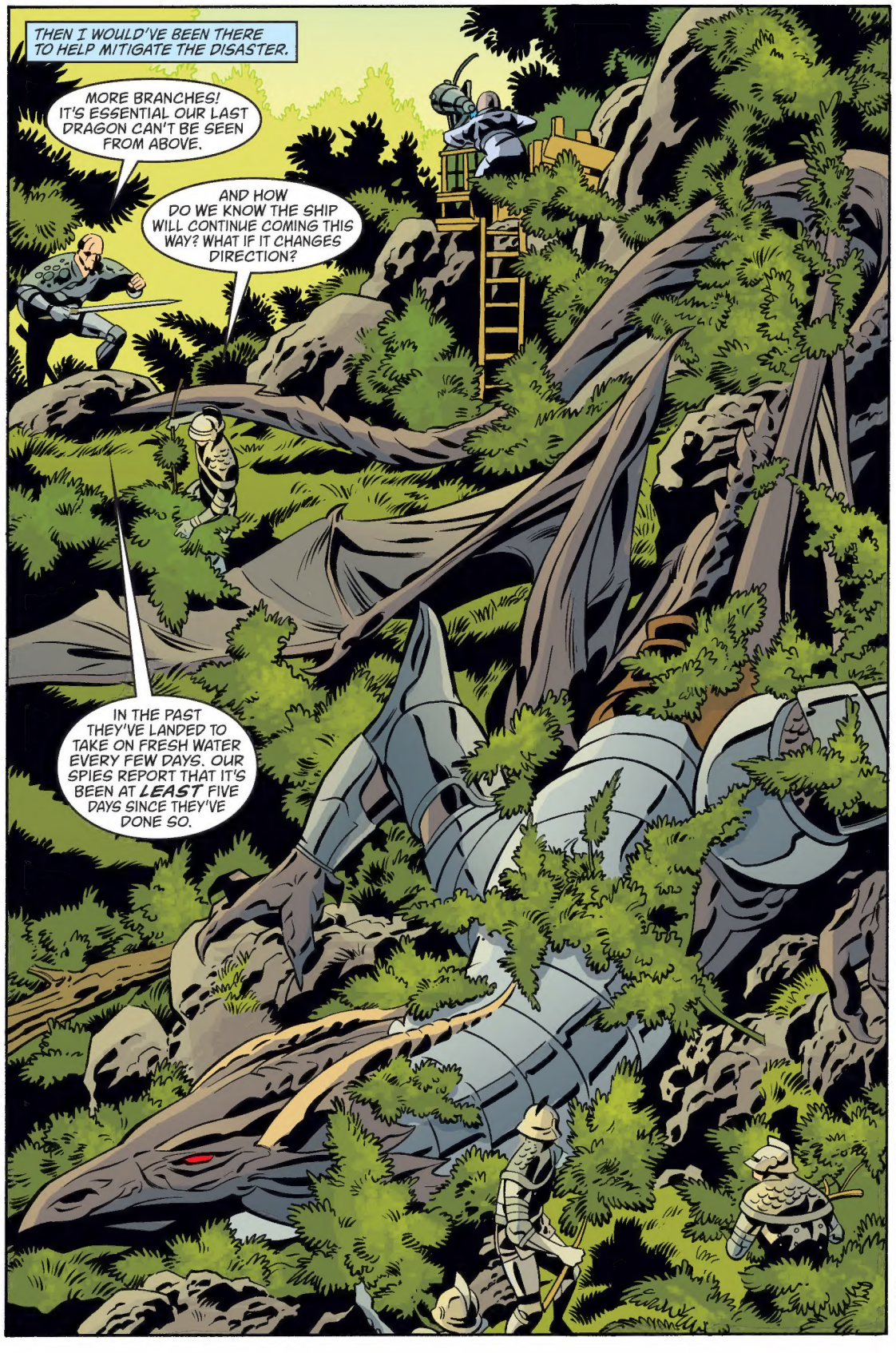
THE FINAL CARPET HAS RETURNED, CAPTAIN. THE HONORED LIEUTENANT IN CHARGE OF BOMB DAMAGE ASSESSMENT REPORTS ANOTHER CLEAN KILL.
THE GATEWAY IS ENTIRELY DESTROYED.
VERY WELL. LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, MAKE ALL PREPARATIONS TO GET UNDER WAY TO OUR FINAL TARGET.
ONE MORE GATE, ONE MORE BOMB, AND THEN OUR CAMPAIGN IS FINISHED. WE CAN RETURN TO OUR RESPECTIVE HOMES FLUSHED WITH VICTORY AND COVERED IN WELL-DESERVED GLORY.


AND AT FORT BRAVO, BIGBY'S TEAM OF COMMANDOS HAD BEEN FIGHTING OFF ONE GROUP OF IMPERIAL SKIRMISHERS AFTER ANOTHER.
OUR SIDE EASILY BLEW THEM AWAY, EITHER FIGURATIVELY WITH MASSIVE MODERN FIREPOWER, OR LITERALLY WHEN BIGBY CAUGHT ENOUGH OF THE ENEMY MASSED CLOSE ENOUGH TOGETHER TO BE WORTH BREAKING OUT HIS TRIED-AND-TRUE HUFF AND PUFF.
ONCE AGAIN WE ACCOMPLISHED THIS WITHOUT SUFFERING ANY CASUALTIES.
ALL BRAGGADOCIO ASIDE, IT WAS NO CONTEST. OUR FORCES WERE BETTER TRAINED, BETTER ARMED AND BETTER SUPPLIED THAN THE ENEMY.
MEDIEVAL ERA TROOPS SIMPLY CAN'T STAND AGAINST MODERN RIFLE TEAMS, NOT UNLESS THEY COULD OUTNUMBER US BY HUNDREDS TO ONE, AND WERE PREPARED TO TAKE OVER-WHELMING LOSSES.
WHICH IS WHAT THEY WERE PREPARING TO TRY NEXT.
SOME ENTERPRISING GENERAL, CUT OFF ENTIRELY FROM HIS CENTRAL COMMAND, HAD MANAGED TO SHOW SOME INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVE.
USING THE SCATTERED AND DISORGANIZED PIECES OF MANY SEPARATE UNITS, HE WAS ASSEMBLING A MASSIVE ARMY ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF FORT BRAVO.

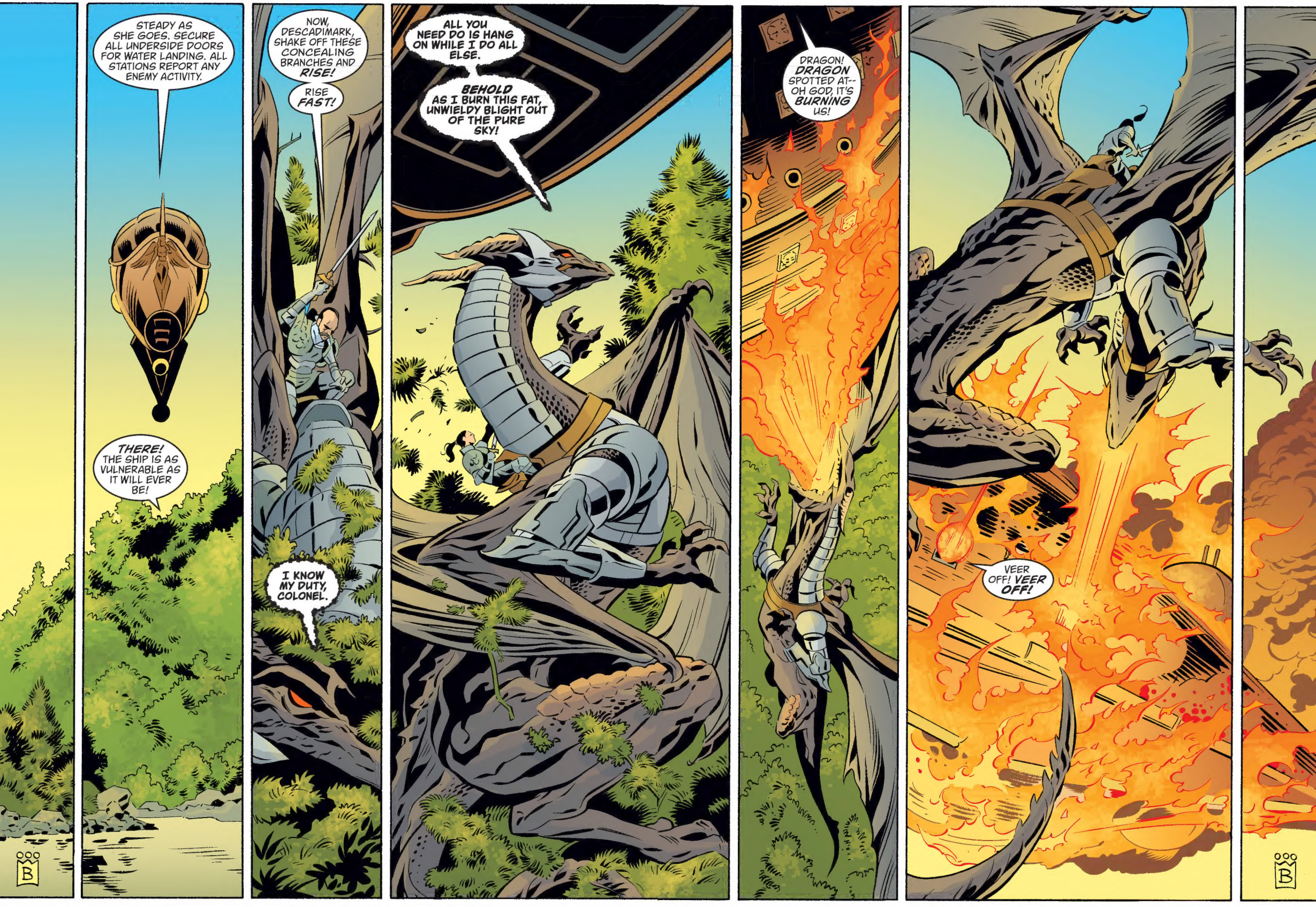

BACK AT THE GLORY...
I'VE BEEN WATCHING THE ARMY GROW OVER THE PAST SEVEN DAYS, ALWAYS FROM A SAFE DISTANCE, OF COURSE.
I SENT A FEW ZEPHYRS FORWARD TO OVERHEAR THEIR PLANS, WHICH ARE PRETTY OBVIOUS.
AS SOON AS THEY'VE GATHERED EVERY TROOP THEY CAN LAY THEIR HANDS ON, THEY PLAN TO ATTACK BIGBY'S FORCE IN ONE MASSIVE CHARGE.
THEY SEEM GRIMLY RESIGNED TO TRADING HUNDREDS OF THEIR OWN TROOPS FOR EACH ONE OF OURS THEY CAN KILL.
OH DEAR, THAT DOES SEEM DISTURBING NEWS INDEED, DOESN'T IT, CAPTAIN SINBAD?
I DARE SAY!
ONCE WE'VE COMPLETED OUR FINAL BOMBING MISSION, WE SHOULD IMMEDIATELY FLY TO THE RELIEF OF OUR SOON-TO-BE-EMBATTLED ALLIES.
PROGRESS REPORT
ONE OF OUR BIG BOMBS RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THEIR ASSEMBLY SHOULD NICELY DISCOURAGE THE IMPERIAL DEVILS FROM ANY THOUGHTS OF MARTIAL ANTAGONISM, DON'T YOU THINK?
PRECISELY MY THINKING, COMBAT COMMANDER CHARMING.
SO, BLUE, HAVE YOU EATEN? WE WERE JUST ABOUT TO SETTLE DOWN TO AN EARLY DINNER, SINCE BOTH THE CAPTAIN AND I WANT TO TURN IN EARLY TONIGHT.
YES, WE BOTH WANT TO BE UP BRIGHT AND EARLY FOR TOMORROW'S LAST BOMBING ACTION.
UHM... SORRY, SIRS, BUT I JUST HAD LUNCH AT WOLF MANOR. I'M ABSOLUTELY STUFFED TO THE GILLS WITH SNOW'S CHILIDOGS.
AND I NEED TO GET BACK TO BRAVO TO REPORT YOUR INTENTIONS.
TELL BIGBY NOT TO WORRY. WE'LL BE THERE IN PLENTY OF TIME TO SAVE THE DAY. HE SHOULD LOOK FOR US LIKE THE TRADITIONAL CAVALRY RIDING TO THE RESCUE.
I PRESUME THAT'S A REFERENCE TO ONE OF THE WESTERN FILMS OF WHICH YOU SPOKE?
EXACTLY SO, MY DEAR SINBAD. AFTER THIS IS ALL OVER YOU SHOULD VISIT ME FOR A NIGHT OF MOVIE WESTERNS--ALL OF THE LEGENDS.
JOHN WAYNE, CLINT EASTWOOD, GARY COOPER--THE CLASSICS.


I WISH I'D STAYED FOR DINNER. I WISH TO GOD I'D STAYED JUST TEN MINUTES LONGER, BEFORE FLITTING AWAY TO MY NEXT APPOINTMENT.
HERE IT COMES! THE DEATH SHIP IS HEADED DIRECTLY THIS WAY!


THEN I WOULD'VE BEEN THERE TO HELP MITIGATE THE DISASTER.
MORE BRANCHES! IT'S ESSENTIAL OUR LAST DRAGON CAN'T BE SEEN FROM ABOVE.
AND HOW DO WE KNOW THE SHIP WILL CONTINUE COMING THIS WAY? WHAT IF IT CHANGES DIRECTION?
IN THE PAST THEY'VE LANDED TO TAKE ON FRESH WATER EVERY FEW DAYS. OUR SPIES REPORT THAT IT'S BEEN AT LEAST FIVE DAYS SINCE THEY'VE DONE SO.

THIS POSITION LIES DIRECTLY BETWEEN THE ONCOMING SHIP AND WHITE MOUNTAIN LAKE, THE ONLY BODY OF WATER IN A HUNDRED MILES BIG ENOUGH FOR THEIR MONSTROSITY TO LAND IN.
NOT ONLY SHOULD THEY PASS DIRECTLY OVER US, BUT THEY WILL ALREADY HAVE SHED CONSIDERABLE ALTITUDE AS THEY DO SO.

I BELIEVE THEY'RE BEGINNING TO REDUCE ALTITUDE ALREADY, SIR!
SEE? THE HARDEST THING FOR ANY MILITARY COMMANDER TO DO IS ALTER HIS PATTERNS IN THE FACE OF ONE EASY VICTORY AFTER ANOTHER.
THEY'LL PASS DIRECTLY OVERHEAD, BECAUSE OUR UNKNOWN ADVERSARY HAS ALREADY FALLEN INTO RELIABLE PATTERNS, AND BECAUSE WE'VE PROVEN TIME AND AGAIN THAT THEY'VE NOTHING TO FEAR FROM US.
AND THEN WE STRIKE!
EVEN SO.


STEADY AS SHE GOES. SECURE ALL UNDERSIDE DOORS FOR WATER LANDING. ALL STATIONS REPORT ANY ENEMY ACTIVITY.
THERE! THE SHIP IS AS VULNERABLE AS IT WILL EVER BE!
NOW, DESCADIMARK, SHAKE OFF THESE CONCEALING BRANCHES AND RISE!
RISE FAST!
I KNOW MY DUTY, COLONEL.
ALL YOU NEED DO IS HANG ON WHILE I DO ALL ELSE.
BEHOLD AS I BURN THIS FAT, UNWIELDY BLIGHT OUT OF THE PURE SKY!
DRAGON! DRAGON SPOTTED AT-- OH GOD, IT'S BURNING US!
VEER OFF! VEER OFF!

WHAT WAS--?
WHAT JUST HAPPENED?
ALL STATIONS REPORT! DID WE HIT SOME-THING?

WE'RE ON FIRE, SIR!
FIRE SUPPRESSION CREWS REPORT TO--TO WHERE? WHAT DECKS?
ALL DECKS, SIR! WE'RE COMPLETELY ENGULFED! WE DON'T HAVE ENOUGH CREWS TO--

WHAT WAS THAT?
THE FIRE'S REACHED SOME OF THE AMMO MAGAZINES, SIR! MULTIPLE EXPLO-SIONS ON SEVERAL DECKS!

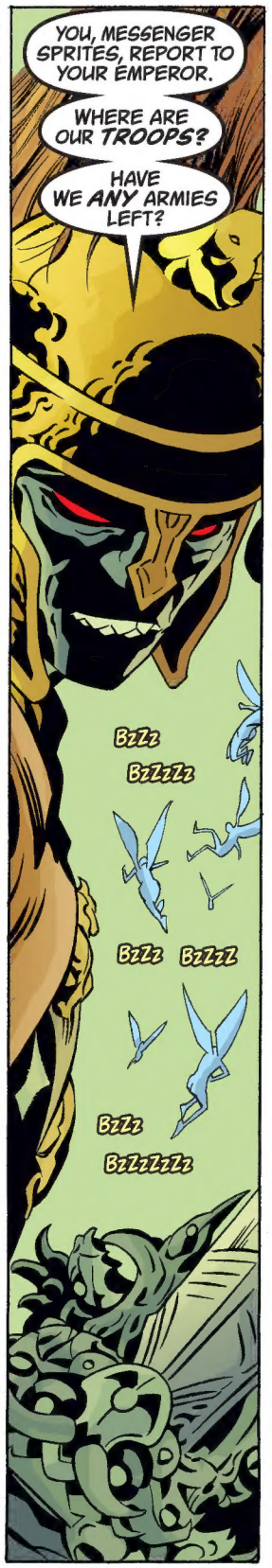
WE NEED TO FIGHT THE FIRES AND RESTORE--
I BELIEVE THAT TIME HAS PASSED, CAPTAIN. THE SHIP IS LOST, MY FRIEND. IT'S TIME TO GIVE THE ORDER.
GIVE THE ORDER, CAPTAIN. YOU'RE THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN.

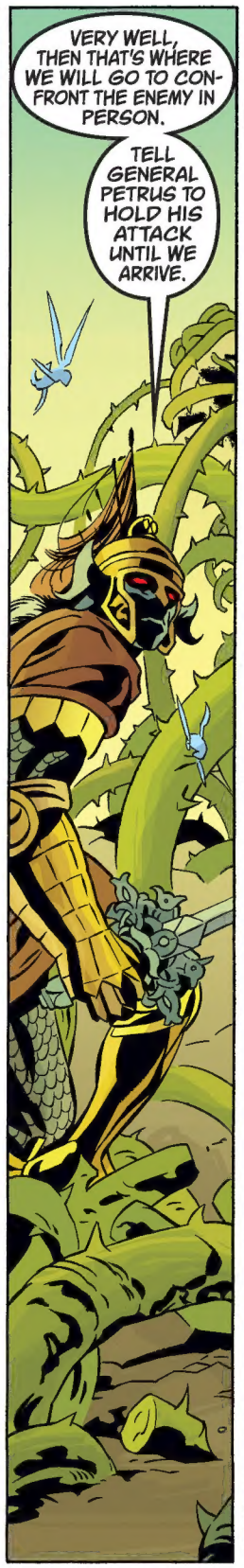
VERY WELL, COMMANDER.
ABANDON SHIP!

THE IMPERIAL CITY...

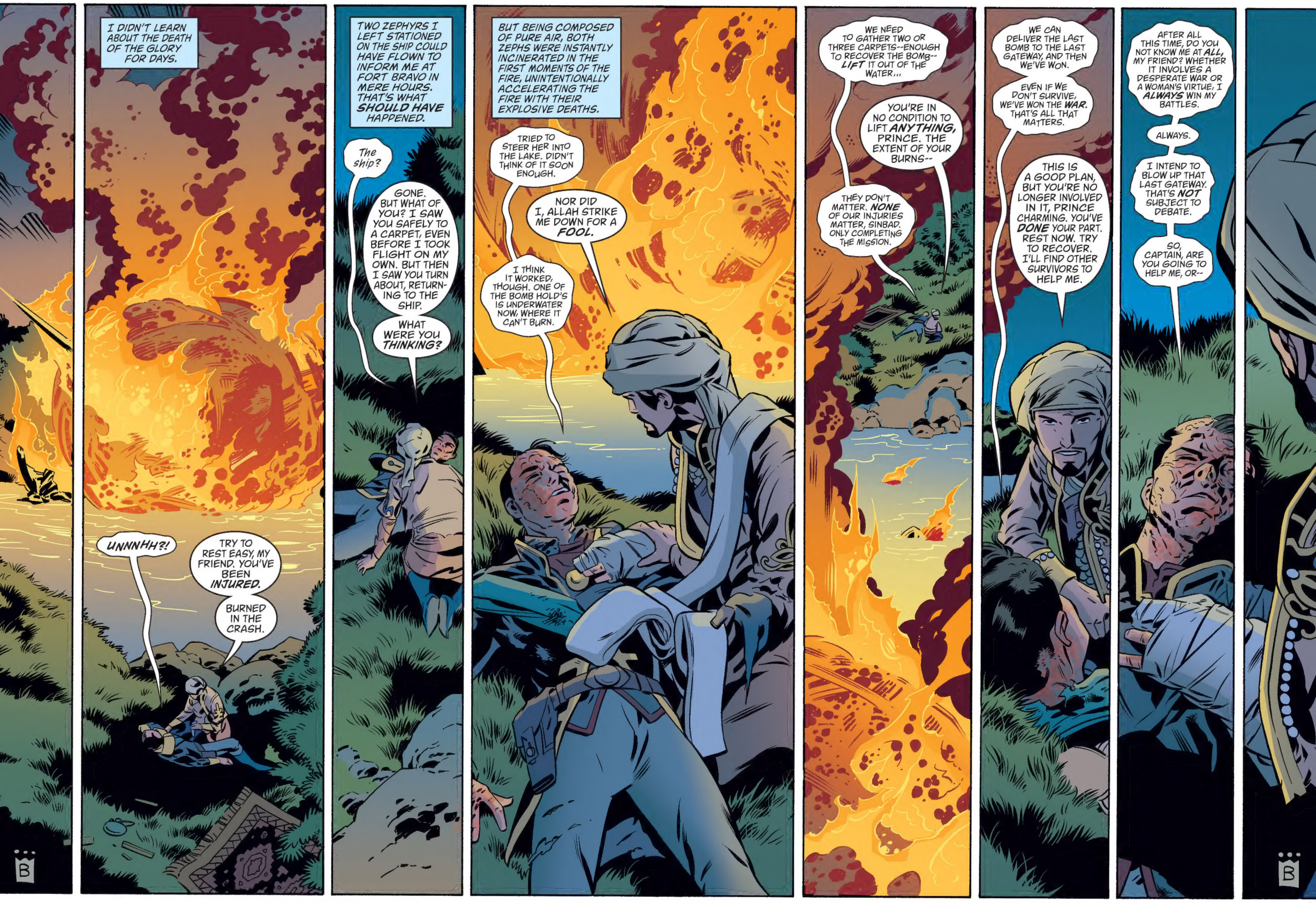
I-- WILL--NOT-- BE--

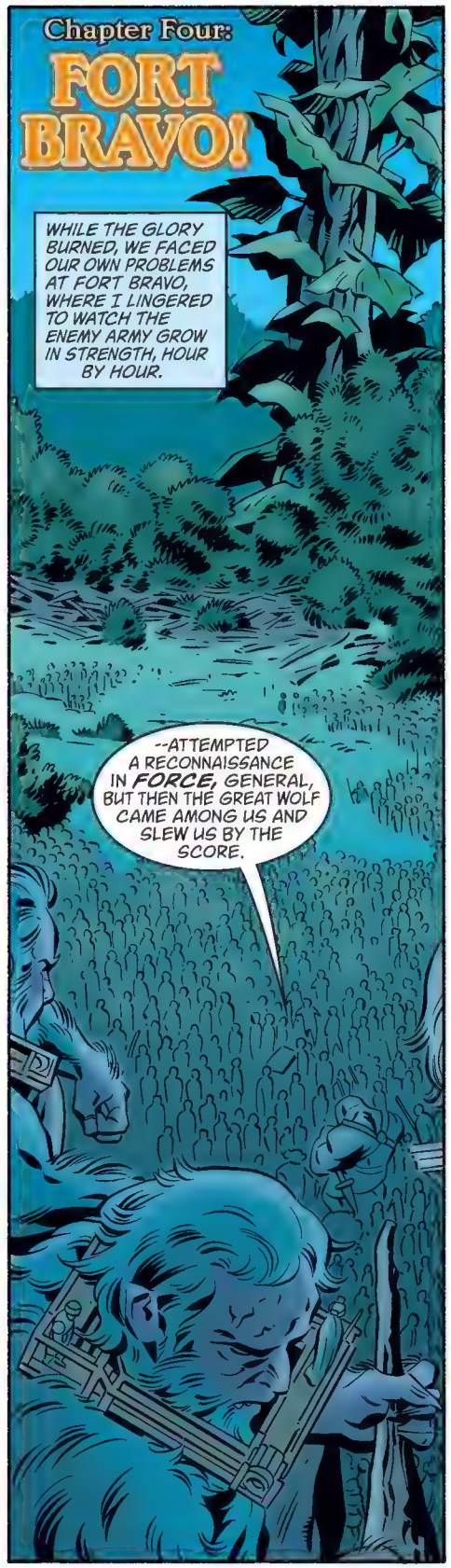
--RESTRAINED!

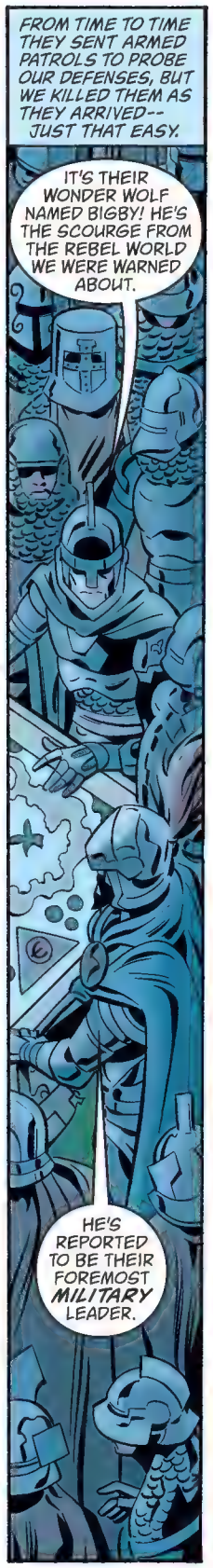

YOU, MESSENGER SPRITES, REPORT TO YOUR EMPEROR.
WHERE ARE OUR TROOPS?
HAVE WE ANY ARMIES LEFT?
BzZz
BzZzZz
BzZz BzZzZ
BzZz
BzZzZzZz


VERY WELL, THEN THAT'S WHERE WE WILL GO TO CONFRONT THE ENEMY IN PERSON.
TELL GENERAL PETRUS TO HOLD HIS ATTACK UNTIL WE ARRIVE.

IN THE MEANTIME FLY HITHER AND YON. SUMMON ALL REMAINING FORCES TO RENDEZVOUS WITH US AT GENERAL PETRUS' ENCAMPMENT.
IT'S PAST TIME FOR YOUR EMPEROR TO PERSONALLY PUT THESE CRIMINAL INVADERS TO THE SWORD!


I DIDN'T LEARN ABOUT THE DEATH OF THE GLORY FOR DAYS.
UNNNHH?!
TRY TO REST EASY, MY FRIEND. YOU'VE BEEN INJURED.
BURNED IN THE CRASH.
TWO ZEPHYRS I LEFT STATIONED ON THE SHIP COULD HAVE FLOWN TO INFORM ME AT FORT BRAVO IN MERE HOURS. THAT'S WHAT SHOULD HAVE HAPPENED.
The ship?
GONE. BUT WHAT OF YOU? I SAW YOU SAFELY TO A CARPET, EVEN BEFORE I TOOK FLIGHT ON MY OWN. BUT THEN I SAW YOU TURN ABOUT, RETURNING TO THE SHIP.
WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?
BUT BEING COMPOSED OF PURE AIR, BOTH ZEPHS WERE INSTANTLY INCINERATED IN THE FIRST MOMENTS OF THE FIRE, UNINTENTIONALLY ACCELERATING THE FIRE WITH THEIR EXPLOSIVE DEATHS.
TRIED TO STEER HER INTO THE LAKE. DIDN'T THINK OF IT SOON ENOUGH.
NOR DID I, ALLAH STRIKE ME DOWN FOR A FOOL.
I THINK IT WORKED, THOUGH. ONE OF THE BOMB HOLD'S IS UNDERWATER NOW. WHERE IT CAN'T BURN.
WE NEED TO GATHER TWO OR THREE CARPETS--ENOUGH TO RECOVER THE BOMB--LIFT IT OUT OF THE WATER...
YOU'RE IN NO CONDITION TO LIFT ANYTHING, PRINCE. THE EXTENT OF YOUR BURNS--
THEY DON'T MATTER. NONE OF OUR INJURIES MATTER, SINBAD. ONLY COMPLETING THE MISSION.
WE CAN DELIVER THE LAST BOMB TO THE LAST GATEWAY, AND THEN WE'VE WON.
EVEN IF WE DON'T SURVIVE, WE'VE WON THE WAR. THAT'S ALL THAT MATTERS.
THIS IS A GOOD PLAN, BUT YOU'RE NO LONGER INVOLVED IN IT, PRINCE CHARMING. YOU'VE DONE YOUR PART. REST NOW. TRY TO RECOVER. I'LL FIND OTHER SURVIVORS TO HELP ME.
AFTER ALL THIS TIME, DO YOU NOT KNOW ME AT ALL, MY FRIEND? WHETHER IT INVOLVES A DESPERATE WAR OR A WOMAN'S VIRTUE, I ALWAYS WIN MY BATTLES.
ALWAYS.
I INTEND TO BLOW UP THAT LAST GATEWAY. THAT'S NOT SUBJECT TO DEBATE.
SO, CAPTAIN, ARE YOU GOING TO HELP ME, OR--

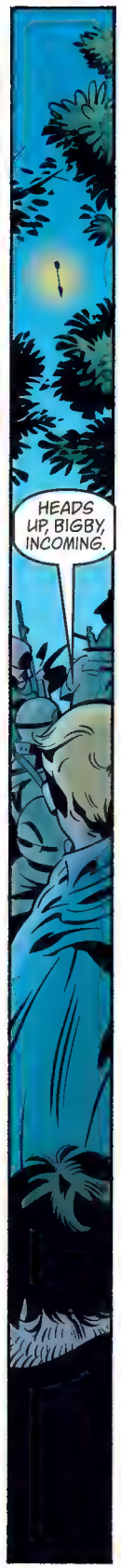

Chapter Four:
FORT BRAVO!
WHILE THE GLORY BURNED, WE FACED OUR OWN PROBLEMS AT FORT BRAVO, WHERE I LINGERED TO WATCH THE ENEMY ARMY GROW IN STRENGTH, HOUR BY HOUR.
--ATTEMPTED A RECONNAISSANCE IN FORCE, GENERAL, BUT THEN THE GREAT WOLF CAME AMONG US AND SLEW US BY THE SCORE.

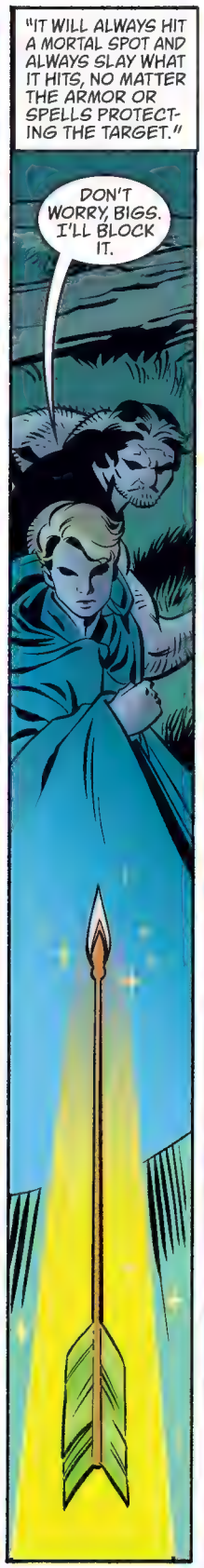

FROM TIME TO TIME THEY SENT ARMED PATROLS TO PROBE OUR DEFENSES, BUT WE KILLED THEM AS THEY ARRIVED--JUST THAT EASY.
IT'S THEIR WONDER WOLF NAMED BIGBY! HE'S THE SCOURGE FROM THE REBEL WORLD WE WERE WARNED ABOUT.
HE'S REPORTED TO BE THEIR FOREMOST MILITARY LEADER.

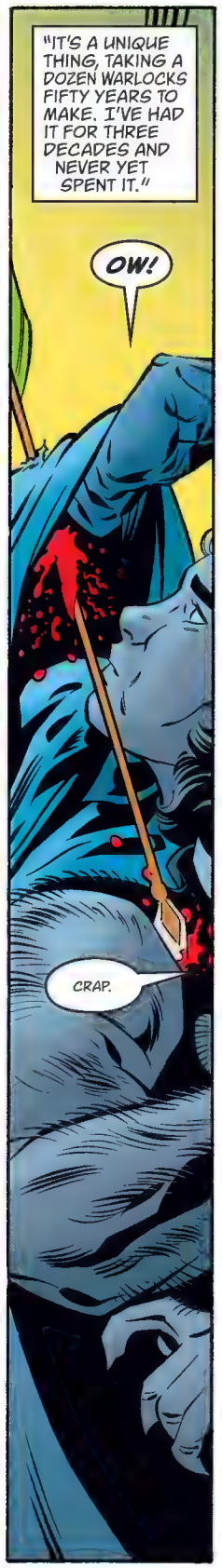
OUR HOPE WAS THAT THEY'D EVENTUALLY GET THE MESSAGE: GO HOME AND SAVE YOURSELVES FROM OUR UNBEATABLE FIREPOWER.
I'VE RECEIVED NEW ORDERS TO REFRAIN FROM A FULL ATTACK FOR NOW, BUT IT WOULD STILL BENEFIT US TO REMOVE FROM PLAY ONE OF THEIR LEADERS AND BATTLE CHAMPIONS.

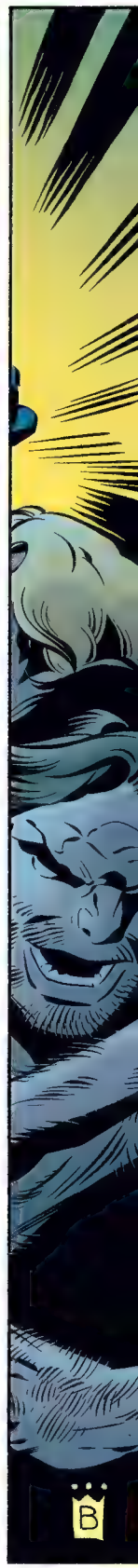
"YOU, BATTLE RUNNER, HURRY TO THE SORCERER'S QUARTERMASTER AND FETCH A PACKAGE MARKED WITH MY SEAL IN CRIMSON AND THE WORDS: KORTA VULMA URSO.
"THOUGH THE GOVERNMENT IN ITS WISDOM SAW FIT TO STRIP US OF OUR MILITARY SORCERERS AND WARLOCKS, THEY DIDN'T TAKE EVERY ITEM OF MARTIAL ENCHANTMENT.
KORTA VULMA URSO

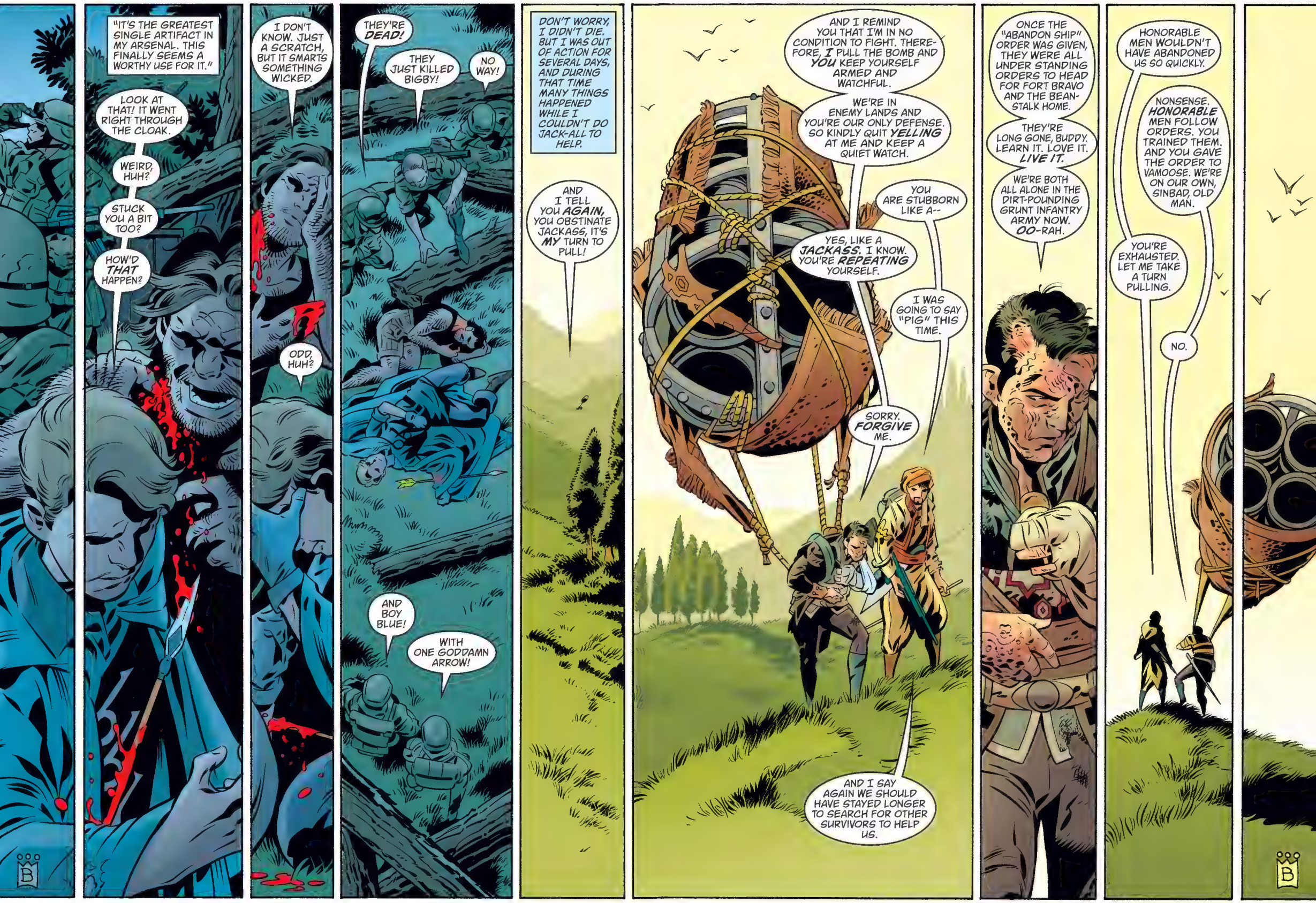
"IN THE HANDS OF OUR BEST ARCHER, THE ARROW OF DIRE FATE WILL FLY TRUE TO ANY TARGET WE CHOOSE FOR IT."


HEADS UP, BIGBY, INCOMING.

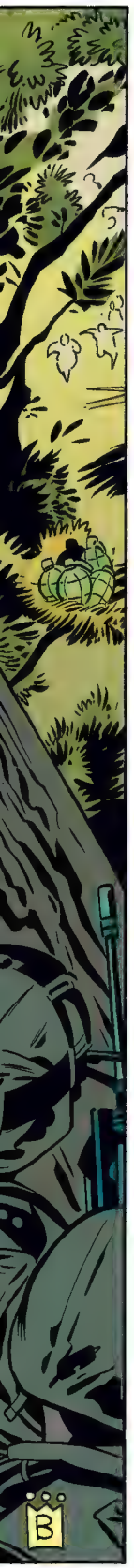

"IT WILL ALWAYS HIT A MORTAL SPOT AND ALWAYS SLAY WHAT IT HITS, NO MATTER THE ARMOR OR SPELLS PROTECTING THE TARGET."
DON'T WORRY, BIGGS. I'LL BLOCK IT.


"IT'S A UNIQUE THING, TAKING A DOZEN WARLOCKS FIFTY YEARS TO MAKE. I'VE HAD IT FOR THREE DECADES AND NEVER YET SPENT IT."
OW!
CRAP.




"IT'S THE GREATEST SINGLE ARTIFACT IN MY ARSENAL. THIS FINALLY SEEMS A WORTHY USE FOR IT."
LOOK AT THAT! IT WENT RIGHT THROUGH THE CLOAK.
WEIRD, HUH?
STUCK YOU A BIT TOO?
HOW'D THAT HAPPEN?
I DON'T KNOW. JUST A SCRATCH, BUT IT SMARTS SOMETHING WICKED.
ODD, HUH?
THEY'RE DEAD!
THEY JUST KILLED BIGBY!
NO WAY!
AND BOY BLUE!
WITH ONE GODDAMN ARROW!
DON'T WORRY, I DIDN'T DIE. BUT I WAS OUT OF ACTION FOR SEVERAL DAYS, AND DURING THAT TIME MANY THINGS HAPPENED WHILE I COULDN'T DO JACK-ALL TO HELP.
AND I TELL YOU AGAIN, YOU OBSTINATE JACKASS, IT'S MY TURN TO PULL!
AND I REMIND YOU THAT I'M IN NO CONDITION TO FIGHT. THEREFORE, I PULL THE BOMB AND YOU KEEP YOURSELF ARMED AND WATCHFUL.
WE'RE IN ENEMY LANDS AND YOU'RE OUR ONLY DEFENSE. SO KINDLY QUIT YELLING AT ME AND KEEP A QUIET WATCH.
YOU ARE STUBBORN LIKE A--
YES, LIKE A JACKASS. I KNOW. YOU'RE REPEATING YOURSELF.
I WAS GOING TO SAY "PIG" THIS TIME.
SORRY. FORGIVE ME.
AND I SAY AGAIN WE SHOULD HAVE STAYED LONGER TO SEARCH FOR OTHER SURVIVORS TO HELP US.
ONCE THE "ABANDON SHIP" ORDER WAS GIVEN, THEY WERE ALL UNDER STANDING ORDERS TO HEAD FOR FORT BRAVO AND THE BEANSTALK HOME.
THEY'RE LONG GONE, BUDDY. LEARN IT. LOVE IT. LIVE IT.
WE'RE BOTH ALL ALONE IN THE DIRT-POUNDING GRUNT INFANTRY ARMY NOW. OO-RAH.
HONORABLE MEN WOULDN'T HAVE ABANDONED US SO QUICKLY.
NONSENSE. HONORABLE MEN FOLLOW ORDERS. YOU TRAINED THEM. AND YOU GAVE THE ORDER TO VAMOOSE. WE'RE ON OUR OWN, SINBAD, OLD MAN.
YOU'RE EXHAUSTED. LET ME TAKE A TURN PULLING.
NO.

ATTACK.



HERE THEY COME!
LOCK AND LOAD! FREE FIRE! FIRE AT WILL!
WHO DIED AND MADE YOU COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF?

BIGBY DID.
BIGBY AIN'T DEAD! THE MEDIC SORCERER SAID HE WOULD BE OKAY AND BACK IN ACTION!

HE BETTER DO IT SOON THEN, BECAUSE I DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH "LATER" WE'VE GOT!

KILL THEM! KILL THEM ALL!

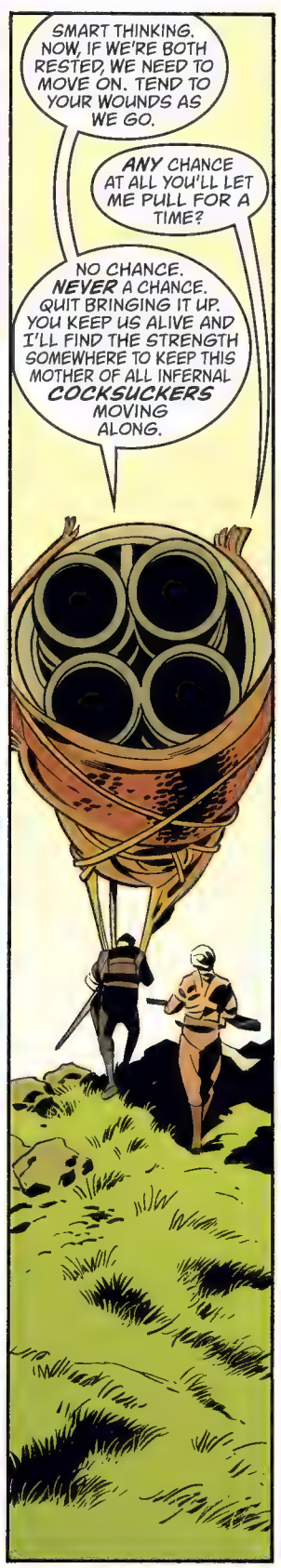
AMMO RUNNER! I NEED AMMO OVER HERE!
TOO MANY! THERE'S TOO MANY! WE'RE ALL DEAD!
RELAX, PAL. WHAT IS IT, TWO HUNDRED TO ONE? THREE HUNDRED TO ONE AT MOST? SO THAT MEANS ONCE YOU'VE KILLED THREE HUNDRED OF THEM YOU CAN TAKE THE REST OF THE DAY OFF.
EASY AS PIE!
I'M HIT! MEDIC! MEDIC!

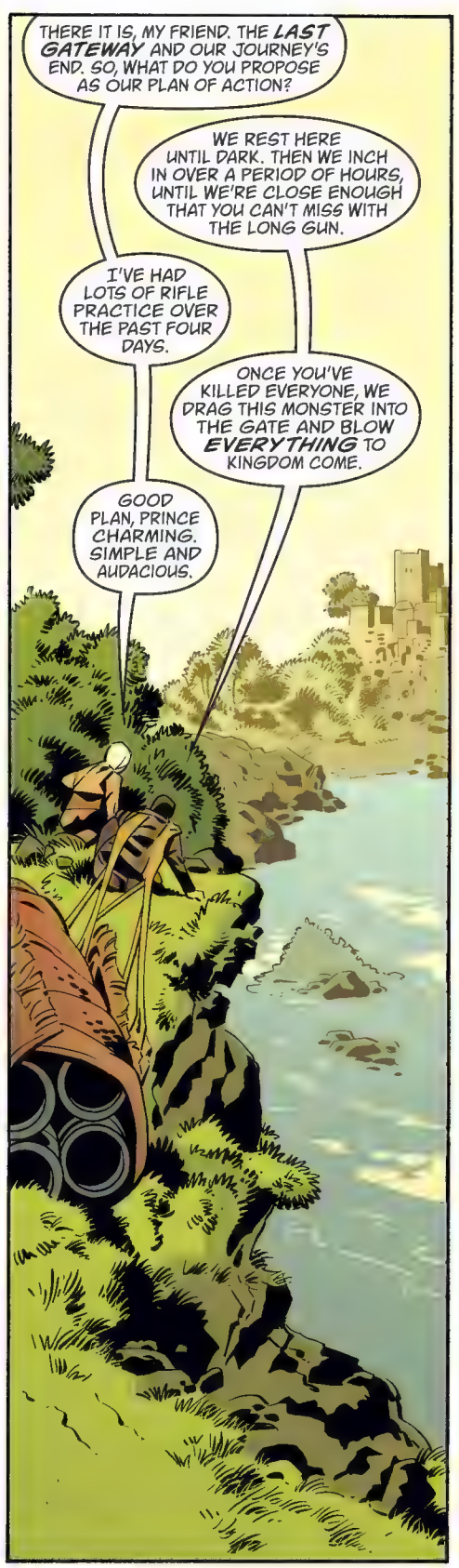
ELSEWHERE...
DIE!
DIE, YOU FILTH-RIDDEN CANNIBAL BEASTS!
SINBAD, LOOK OUT, YOU--!

OH, NEVER MIND. I GOT HIM.
BLAM!

HOW BAD DID THEY GET YOU?
MINOR CUTS ONLY. THEY MOVED IN EN MASSE ONCE THEY REALIZED I WAS OUT OF BULLETS. BUT THEY HESITATED, GIVING ME TIME TO DROP THE RIFLE IN FAVOR OF TWO GOOD BLADES.
WELL, RELOAD THE RIFLE BEFORE YOU TEND TO YOUR WOUNDS. WHO KNOWS HOW CLOSE OTHER TROOPS MIGHT BE?

AGREED. BUT, ALLAH WILLING, WE NEED TO HOLD OFF USING THE RIFLE FROM NOW ON.
WE WANT TO HAVE PLENTY OF BULLETS LEFT TO CLEAR OUT THE LAST GATEWAY FROM AS LONG A DISTANCE AS WE CAN MANAGE.


SMART THINKING. NOW, IF WE'RE BOTH RESTED, WE NEED TO MOVE ON. TEND TO YOUR WOUNDS AS WE GO.
ANY CHANCE AT ALL YOU'LL LET ME PULL FOR A TIME?
NO CHANCE. NEVER A CHANCE. QUIT BRINGING IT UP. YOU KEEP US ALIVE AND I'LL FIND THE STRENGTH SOMEWHERE TO KEEP THIS MOTHER OF ALL INFERNAL COCKSUCKERS MOVING ALONG.


THERE IT IS, MY FRIEND. THE LAST GATEWAY AND OUR JOURNEY'S END. SO, WHAT DO YOU PROPOSE AS OUR PLAN OF ACTION?
WE REST HERE UNTIL DARK. THEN WE INCH IN OVER A PERIOD OF HOURS, UNTIL WE'RE CLOSE ENOUGH THAT YOU CAN'T MISS WITH THE LONG GUN.
I'VE HAD LOTS OF RIFLE PRACTICE OVER THE PAST FOUR DAYS.
ONCE YOU'VE KILLED EVERYONE, WE DRAG THIS MONSTER INTO THE GATE AND BLOW EVERYTHING TO KINGDOM COME.
GOOD PLAN, PRINCE CHARMING. SIMPLE AND AUDACIOUS.

Nnhhhh?
WAS I DEAD?
AH, SO THE DEAD WAKE AT LAST.
NEARLY ENOUGH. I WAS WORRIED THERE FOR A TIME. YOU FELL VICTIM TO A MOST POWERFUL DOSE OF VERY BAD MAGIC. MORE THAN ONCE I THOUGHT WE'D LOST YOU.
HOW LONG WAS I OUT?
MOST OF FOUR DAYS.
CRAP! AND THE BATTLE?
BIGBY
I'VE LOST COUNT OF THE NUMBER OF TIMES THEY'VE ATTACKED AND WE'VE BEATEN THEM BACK, BIGBY. ALWAYS JUST BARELY AND AT GREAT COST.
COUNTING DEAD AND WOUNDED, WE'RE DOWN TO HALF OUR FIGHTING FORCE. WE NEED OUR WOUNDED EVACUATED, AND WE NEED NEW SUPPLIES DESPERATELY.
FALLHART
OUR FIREPOWER'S THE ONLY THING THAT'S KEPT THEM FROM OVERRUNNING US, AND WE'RE IN DANGER OF LOSING THAT.
WHERE'S BLUE BEEN WITH HIS WITCHING CLOAK?
RIGHT HERE, BIGBY. BUT I'VE BEEN OUT LIKE A LIGHT. JUST LIKE YOU. HOW DO YOU FEEL?
MOSTLY LIKE I'VE GOT A HANGOVER. WHY'S THERE STILL PART OF THE ARROW IN YOUR ARM?
I DIDN'T WANT TO RISK REMOVING IT. ITS MAGIC IS BEYOND MY SKILLS. HE'LL HAVE TO GET DOCTOR SWINEHEART AND ONE OF THE 13TH FLOOR'S BETTER SORCERERS TO FINISH TAKING IT OUT.
WHICH I'LL DO IN DUE TIME, ONCE I'VE FETCHED SOME MORE AMMO AND TRANSPORTED THE WORST OF THE WOUNDED HOME.
ASSUMING THIS CLOAK STILL WORKS WITH A HOLE IN IT.
I GUESS WE'RE ABOUT TO SEE.

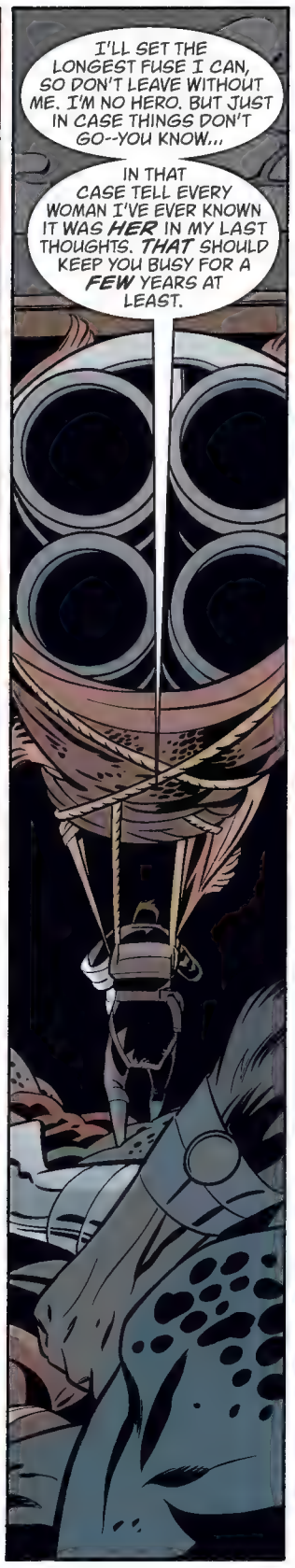
CAN YOU FUNCTION WITH THAT THING STILL STICKING THROUGH YOU? I GOT ONE SMALL SCRATCH FROM IT AND GRANDOURS SAYS IT NEARLY ENDED ME.
IT HURTS LIKE THE DICKENS, BUT THAT'S ALL.
AS NEAR AS I CAN TELL, SINCE MR. BLUE WASN'T THIS THING'S INTENDED TARGET, HE'S SAFE FROM MOST OF ITS DEADLIER EFFECTS. YOU, ON THE OTHER HAND--
I WAS THE TARGET SO IT TRIED HARDER TO KILL ME?
ESSENTIALLY, YES.
SMART DAMNED ARROW. HAVE THEY FIRED ANY OTHERS?
NOT TO MY KNOWLEDGE.
OKAY, HERE GOES NOTHING. LET'S SEE IF THIS THING STILL WORKS. IF IT DOES, I'LL BE BACK WITH MORE BULLETS AND READY TO TAKE SOME OF THE WOUNDED.
OKAY, FALLHART, WHAT'S OUR STATUS?
WE'VE TAKEN OUT ALL OF THEIR BIGGER ASSETS, AT THE COST OF OUR BIGGER ASSETS--ONLY THEY'VE STILL GOT THE EMPEROR HIMSELF.
HE'S HERE?
YEAH, AND NOTHING WE DO CAN TOUCH HIM. IT'S LIKE HE'S GOT SOME SORT OF FORCE FIELD AGAINST EVERY POSSIBLE KIND OF WEAPON.
YEAH, HE'S SUPPOSED TO BE IMMUNE TO EVERYTHING EXCEPT THE BIGGEST, BADDEST SORT OF MAGIC. AND THAT'S ME IN A NUTSHELL.
GET READY TO FALL BACK TO THE BASE OF THE BEANSTALK. I'M GOING TO TAKE OUT THE EMPEROR MYSELF.
FALL BACK, PEOPLE! FALL BACK TO THE LAST REDOUBT AROUND THE BEANSTALK!
AFTER THAT WE'LL MOP UP WHOEVER'S LEFT.

AT THE FINAL GATEWAY...
BY THE ALMIGHTY'S BENEVOLENT GRACE, OF WHICH WE DESERVE NOT THE SMALLEST PART, WE'RE BOTH ALIVE, MY FRIEND.
NOT FOR MUCH LONGER, THE WAY I FEEL.

BUT OUR JOURNEY'S FINALLY AT AN END.
I WISH IT WERE SO, SINBAD. BUT WE'VE GOT TO GET THIS THING INSIDE THE GATE PROPER AND SET IT OFF, BEFORE REINFORCEMENTS ARRIVE. NO TIME TO REST YET.

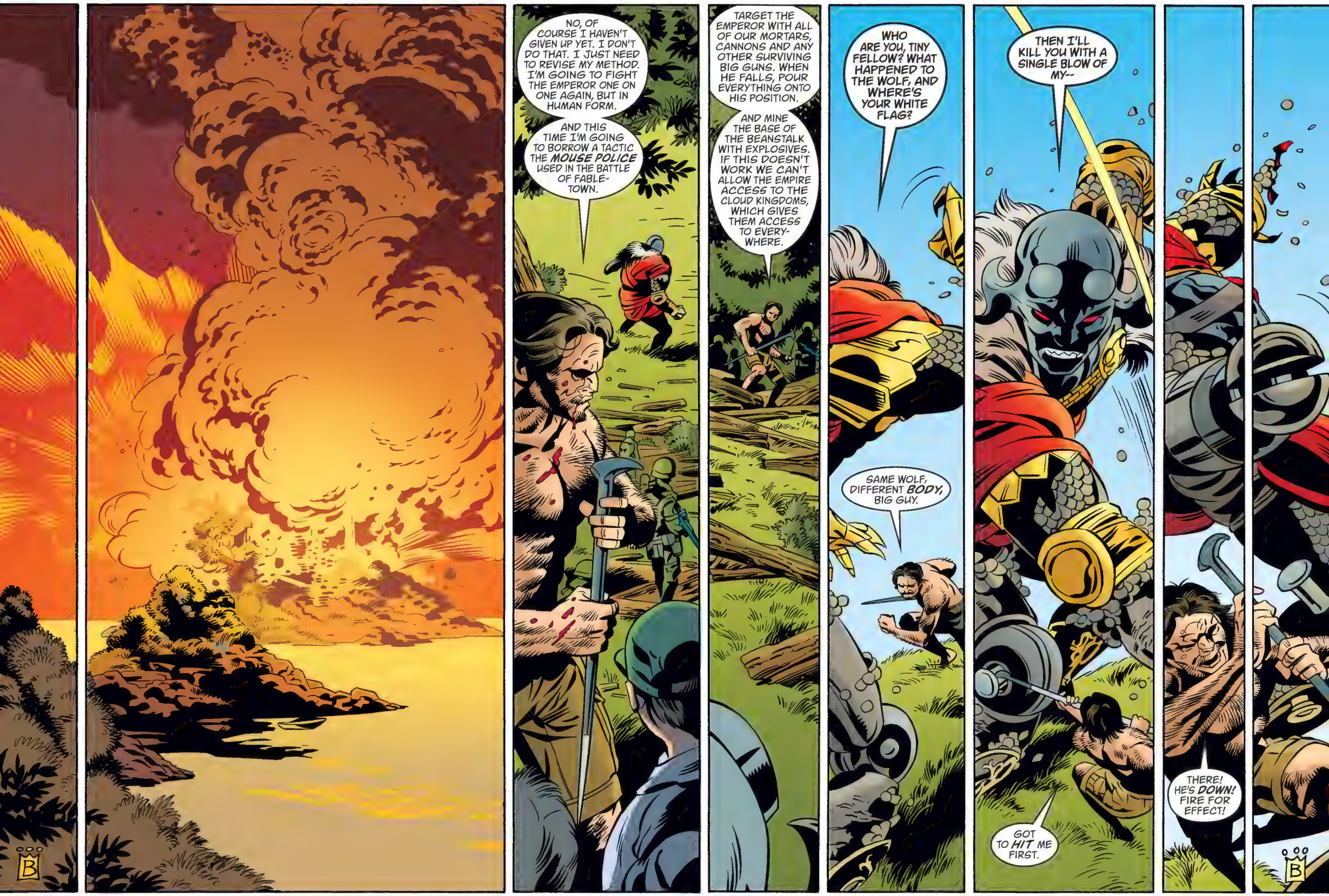
WHAT I MEANT TO SAY IS: YOUR JOURNEY IS AT LAST AT AN END. I'LL TAKE IT FROM HERE, PRINCE CHARMING.
A NOBLE IMPULSE, BUT MISGUIDED. DO YOU KNOW HOW TO ARM THIS THING AND SET IT OFF?
NO, NOT YET, BUT--

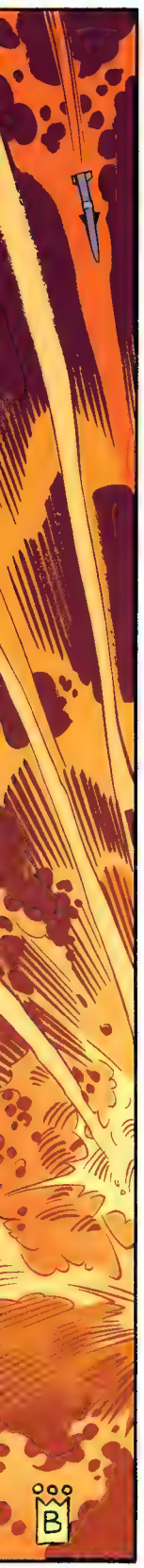
TOO BAD. I DON'T HAVE TIME TO TEACH YOU. AND WE CAN'T AFFORD WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF YOU'RE NOT A GOOD STUDENT. GET WELL CLEAR, CAPTAIN.

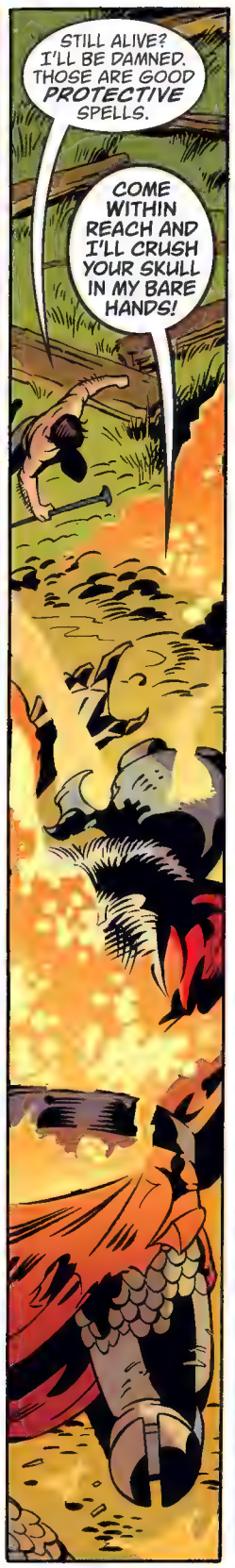

I'LL SET THE LONGEST FUSE I CAN, SO DON'T LEAVE WITHOUT ME. I'M NO HERO. BUT JUST IN CASE THINGS DON'T GO--YOU KNOW...
IN THAT CASE TELL EVERY WOMAN I'VE EVER KNOWN IT WAS HER IN MY LAST THOUGHTS. THAT SHOULD KEEP YOU BUSY FOR A FEW YEARS AT LEAST.

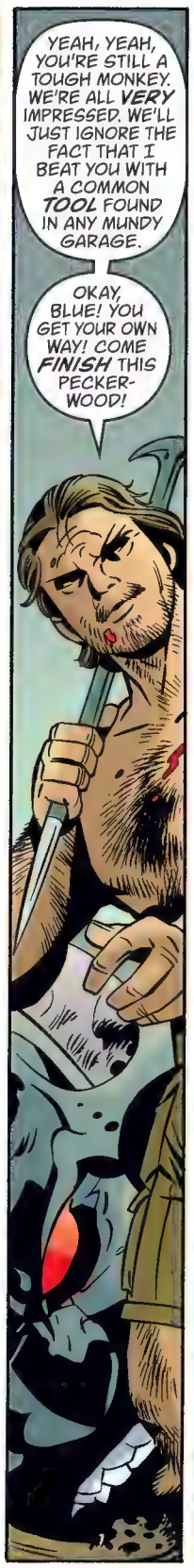
I ARRIVED BACK AT FORT BRAVO JUST IN TIME TO SEE BIGBY LAUNCH HIS LAST DITCH GAMBIT.
HOWL WINDS AND BLOW! SCATTER MY ARMY AS YOU WILL, BUT YOU WILL NEVER MOVE ME!
COME OUT, WOLF, AND FACE ME! I OFFER YOU AN HONOR NO ONE ELSE HAS EVER ENJOYED IN THE ENTIRE HISTORY OF THE EMPIRE--SINGLE COMBAT WITH THE EMPEROR!
DO YOU DARE FACE ME, BEAST?!
KEEP YOUR SHINY METAL SHIRT ON, PUPPET BOY. I'M HERE.
WHILE THEY FOUGHT I HURRIEDLY REPLACED AMMO STORES AND MADE THREE ROUND TRIPS TO EVACUATE THE WOUNDED.
HAH!
I'D HEARD YOU WERE BIGGER!
YOU'RE NOT EVEN AS BIG AS A NORMAL WOLF COMPARED TO ME!

IS THIS THE LIMIT OF YOUR POWER?
CAN'T YOU SUMMON MORE TO ENLARGE YOURSELF?
I'M THE EMPEROR!
I NEVER LOSE IN BATTLE!
NAUGHT EXISTS THAT CAN BEST ME!
THAT'S IT! SLINK OFF, WHIPPED DOG!
I'LL PAUSE HERE FOR A SHORT TIME TO ACCEPT YOUR SURRENDER, BEFORE VENTURING FORWARD TO FINISH OFF YOUR BAND OF SAVAGES.
NOTE, THOUGH, THAT THE ONLY MERCY I OFFER IS A QUICK EXECUTION.
AND THEN THE LAST DREGS OF RESOLVE WENT OUT OF US WITH A SINGLE COMMUNAL HUSH. FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MEMORY I SAW BIGBY RETIRE IN DEFEAT.
EVEN IF THE GLORY WON THE WAR BY COMPLETING ITS MISSION, WE'D LOST THE BATTLE TO HOLD THE DOOR OUT. THOSE OF US STILL HERE MIGHT DIE HERE.
NOT ME, THOUGH. I'D SURVIVE. THAT'S WHAT I DO--SURVIVE LOST BATTLES WHERE EVERYONE ELSE DIES.


NO, OF COURSE I HAVEN'T GIVEN UP YET. I DON'T DO THAT. I JUST NEED TO REVISE MY METHOD. I'M GOING TO FIGHT THE EMPEROR ONE ON ONE AGAIN, BUT IN HUMAN FORM.
AND THIS TIME I'M GOING TO BORROW A TACTIC THE MOUSE POLICE USED IN THE BATTLE OF FABLE-TOWN.
TARGET THE EMPEROR WITH ALL OF OUR MORTARS, CANNONS AND ANY OTHER SURVIVING BIG GUNS. WHEN HE FALLS, POUR EVERYTHING ONTO HIS POSITION.
AND MINE THE BASE OF THE BEANSTALK WITH EXPLOSIVES. IF THIS DOESN'T WORK WE CAN'T ALLOW THE EMPIRE ACCESS TO THE CLOUD KINGDOMS, WHICH GIVES THEM ACCESS TO EVERY-WHERE.
WHO ARE YOU, TINY FELLOW? WHAT HAPPENED TO THE WOLF, AND WHERE'S YOUR WHITE FLAG?
SAME WOLF, DIFFERENT BODY, BIG GUY.
THEN I'LL KILL YOU WITH A SINGLE BLOW OF MY--
GOT TO HIT ME FIRST.
THERE! HE'S DOWN! FIRE FOR EFFECT!




STILL ALIVE? I'LL BE DAMNED. THOSE ARE GOOD PROTECTIVE SPELLS.
COME WITHIN REACH AND I'LL CRUSH YOUR SKULL IN MY BARE HANDS!

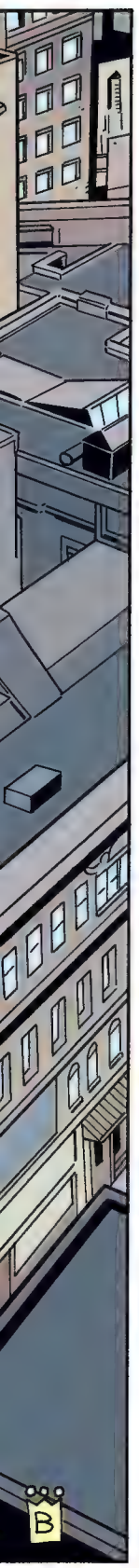

YEAH, YEAH, YOU'RE STILL A TOUGH MONKEY. WE'RE ALL VERY IMPRESSED. WE'LL JUST IGNORE THE FACT THAT I BEAT YOU WITH A COMMON TOOL FOUND IN ANY MUNDY GARAGE.
OKAY, BLUE! YOU GET YOUR OWN WAY! COME FINISH THIS PECKER-WOOD!

PART OF OUR DOCTRINE WAS THAT I WAS NEVER ALLOWED TO ENTER DIRECT COMBAT. MY USE AS OUR LINE OF COMMUNICATIONS AND SUPPLY WAS TOO VITAL.
BUT JUST THIS ONCE BIGBY LET ME CHEAT.
REMEMBER THIS, MR. EMPEROR, SIR? THE VORPAL SWORD.

SNICKER SNACK!

AND THAT, MY FRIENDS, IS HOW THE GREAT WAR ENDED.
WHAT DO YOU WANT ON YOUR BUN, BIGBY?

NOT WITH A BANG, BUT A WIENIE ROAST.
NO BUN AT ALL, KID. I DON'T DO BUNS, OR TOPPINGS, OR ANYTHING THAT ISN'T MEAT.
LOOK! FLYING CARPETS! LOTS OF THEM!



EPILOGUE:
AMNESTY
IN THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED, WE HAD SCANT TIME TO REST AND RECUPERATE. WHEN THE WINNING SIDE OF A WAR THAT SPANNED WORLDS IS A SMALL POPULATION THAT CAN FILL ONE SHORT BLOCK OF A SINGLE CITY STREET, THE END OF SAID WAR BECOMES QUITE A BUSY BUSINESS.
FORD LAUNDRY

WE BROUGHT OUR SURVIVORS HOME.
SOME TOOK WEEKS TO FIND, ESCAPING AND EVADING THE ENEMY FORCES SINGLY OR IN PAIRS, EXACTLY AS WE SPENT A FORTUNE TRAINING THEM TO DO.

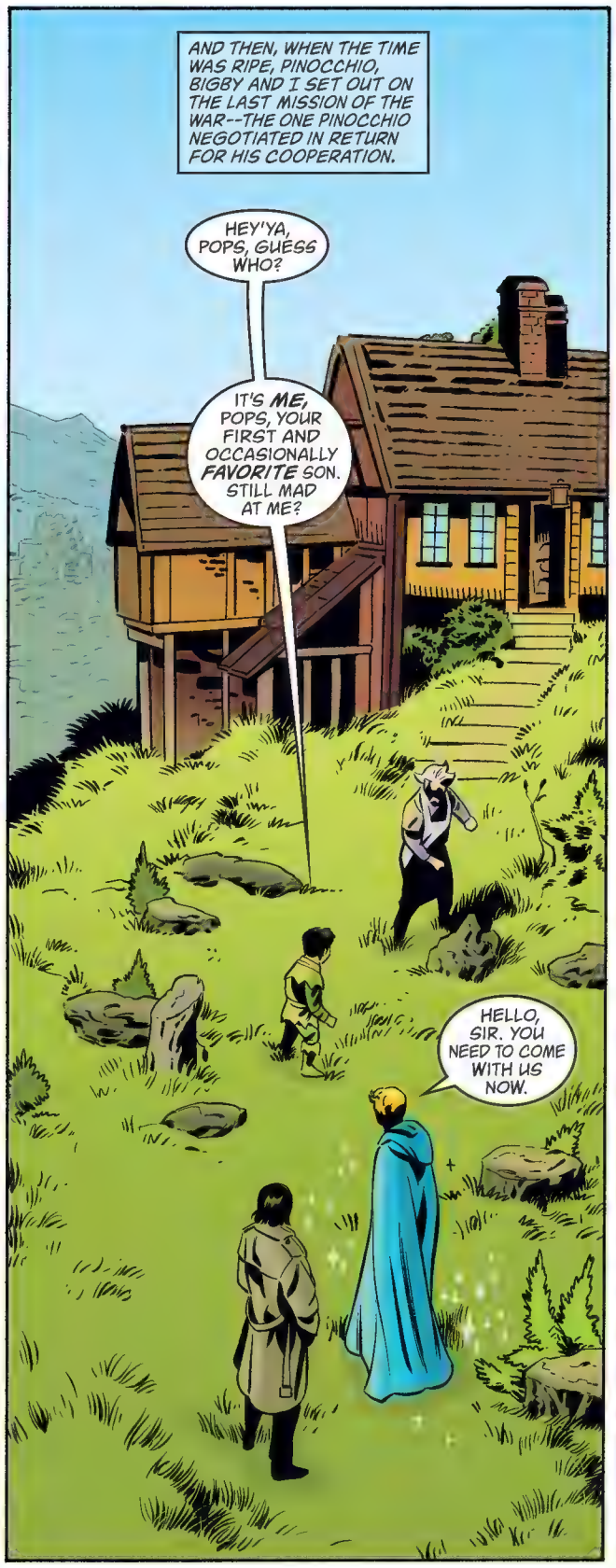
WE FOUND CAPTAIN SINBAD MORE DEAD THAN ALIVE.
I'M NOT SURE WHAT WENT WRONG. MAYBE THE BOMB'S FUSE DELAY WAS DAMAGED. BUT PRINCE CHARMING NEVER GOT CLEAR OF THE BLAST.
HE DIED WITH THE SAME BOMB THAT ENDED OUR MISSION AND KILLED THE GREAT EMPIRE.
I'LL ALWAYS LOVE AND HONOR HIM AS MY OWN BROTHER.

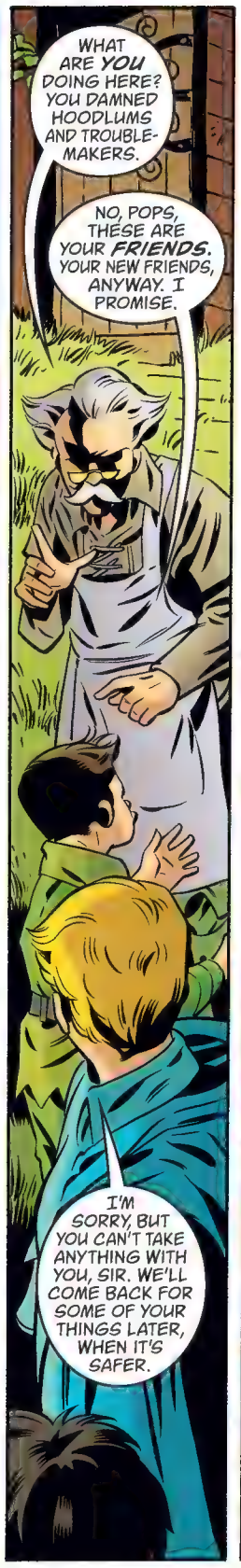
WE BURIED OUR DEAD UP AT THE FARM--NO MORE TRIPS DOWN THE WITCHING WELL FOR OUR SACRED FALLEN.
--IN THE SURE AND CERTAIN HOPE OF THE RESURRECTION.
MR TOAD

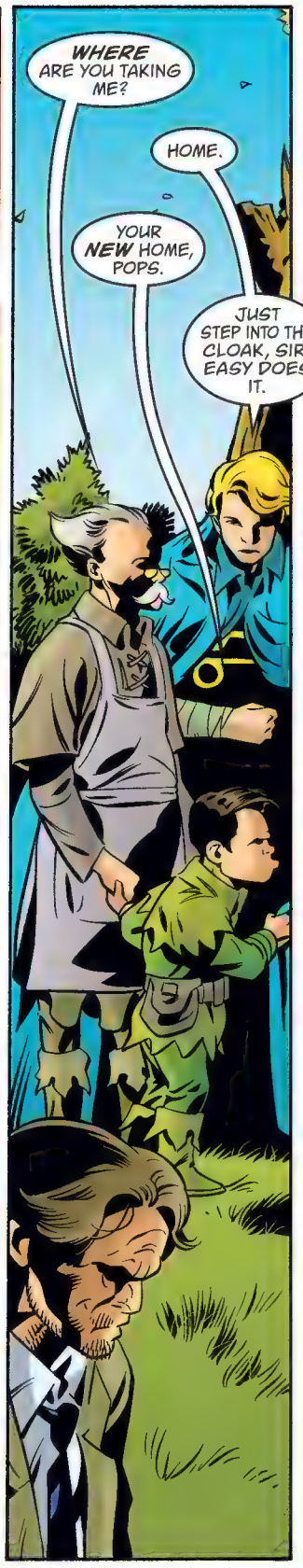
AND WE HELD SERVICES FOR THOSE WHOSE BODIES WE COULDN'T FIND OR RECOVER INTACT.

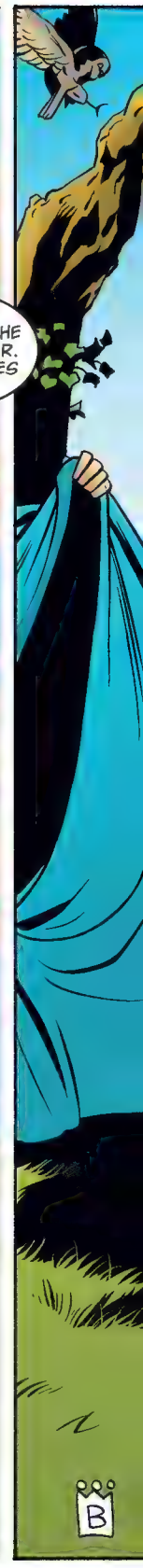
I UNDERWENT A SIX-HOUR OPERATION, INVOLVING DOCTOR SWINEHEART AND A TEAM OF TSK-TSKING SORCERERS, TO REMOVE THE REMAINDER OF THE MAGIC KILLER ARROW FROM MY ARM.
OW! AGAIN I SAY OW! WHY DO I HAVE TO BE AWAKE FOR THIS?
WE CAN'T RISK A GENERAL ANESTHESIA. WHO KNOWS HOW IT MIGHT REACT WITH THE DEGRADING SPELLS ATTACHED TO THE FOREIGN OBJECT?

AND AS OFTEN AS POSSIBLE, WE CELEBRATED--WILDLY AND UNRESERVEDLY, KNOWING THOSE WHO DIDN'T MAKE IT WOULD HAVE DONE THE SAME.
SO WHEN DO WE START RESERVING WHAT WORLD WE WANT?
YOU'RE THIRD GENERATION, BILL. YOU DON'T HAVE A HOMEWORLD TO GO HOME TO.
WHO SAID ANYTHING ABOUT GOING HOME? I'M TALKING CONQUEST. RIGHTFUL SPOILS OF WAR, RIGHT?


AND THEN, WHEN THE TIME WAS RIPE, PINOCCHIO, BIGBY AND I SET OUT ON THE LAST MISSION OF THE WAR--THE ONE PINOCCHIO NEGOTIATED IN RETURN FOR HIS COOPERATION.
HEY'YA, POPS, GUESS WHO?
IT'S ME, POPS, YOUR FIRST AND OCCASIONALLY FAVORITE SON. STILL MAD AT ME?
HELLO, SIR. YOU NEED TO COME WITH US NOW.


WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE? YOU DAMNED HOODLUMS AND TROUBLE-MAKERS.
NO, POPS, THESE ARE YOUR FRIENDS. YOUR NEW FRIENDS, ANYWAY. I PROMISE.
I'M SORRY, BUT YOU CAN'T TAKE ANYTHING WITH YOU, SIR. WE'LL COME BACK FOR SOME OF YOUR THINGS LATER, WHEN IT'S SAFER.

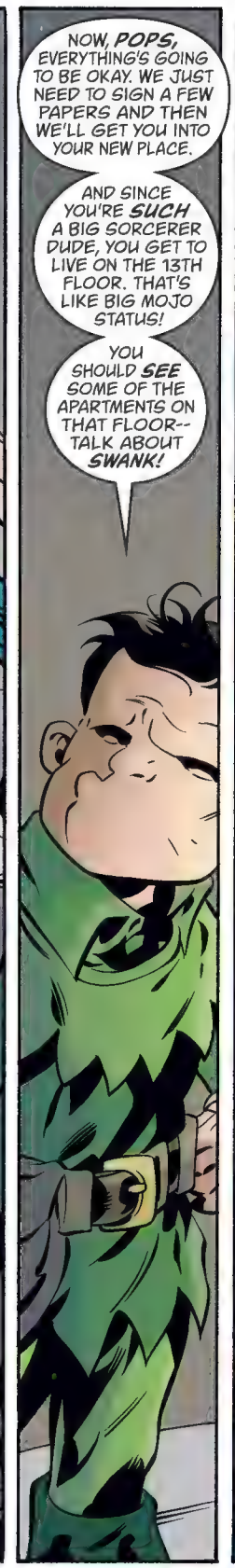

WHERE ARE YOU TAKING ME?
HOME.
YOUR NEW HOME, POPS.
JUST STEP INTO THE CLOAK, SIR. EASY DOES IT.

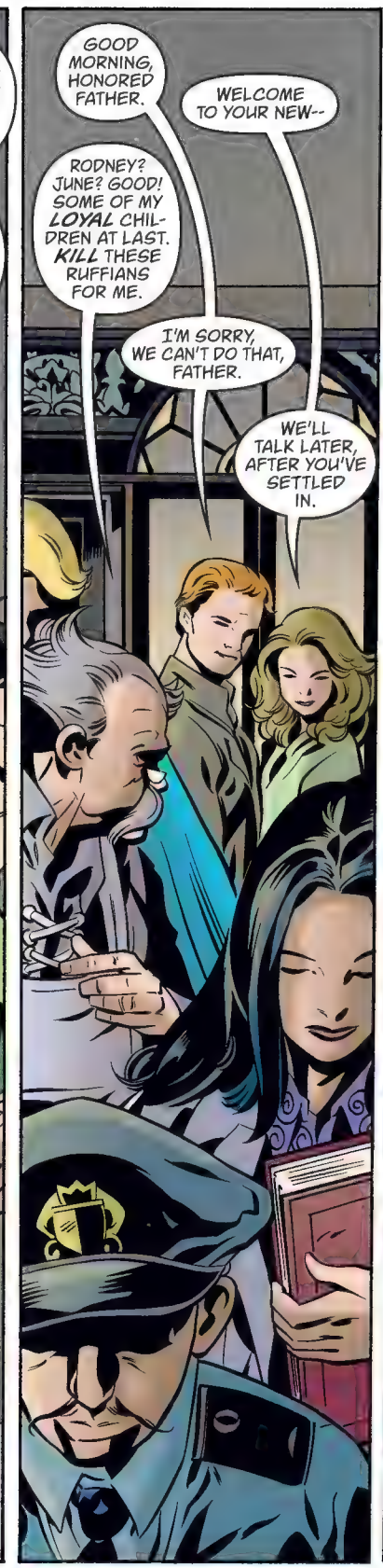


WE BROUGHT GEPPETTO TO FABLETOWN--AND GET THIS: NOT AS A PRISONER OF WAR.
LOOK! IS THAT--?
GEPPETTO?
THE GODDAMN BLOODY ADVERSARY HERE?

AMAZING, HUH?
WE CAPTURED HIM! WE CAPTURED THE ADVERSARY!
STAY BACK, STANLEY. YOU DIDN'T CAPTURE ANYONE. YOU STAYED HOME DURING THIS WAR, REMEMBER?

PLEASE STAY BACK, EVERYONE. WE JUST NEED TO ESCORT THIS MAN INSIDE.
WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?
DON'T BE SO GRABBY WITH ME!
MOVE IT OR LOSE IT, BUDDY.


NOW, POPS, EVERYTHING'S GOING TO BE OKAY. WE JUST NEED TO SIGN A FEW PAPERS AND THEN WE'LL GET YOU INTO YOUR NEW PLACE.
AND SINCE YOU'RE SUCH A BIG SORCERER DUDE, YOU GET TO LIVE ON THE 13TH FLOOR. THAT'S LIKE BIG MOJO STATUS!
YOU SHOULD SEE SOME OF THE APARTMENTS ON THAT FLOOR--TALK ABOUT SWANK!


GOOD MORNING, HONORED FATHER.
WELCOME TO YOUR NEW--
RODNEY? JUNE? GOOD! SOME OF MY LOYAL CHILDREN AT LAST. KILL THESE RUFFIANS FOR ME.
I'M SORRY, WE CAN'T DO THAT, FATHER.
WE'LL TALK LATER, AFTER YOU'VE SETTLED IN.

THIS WAY, SIR. WE'LL DO THE SIGNING IN THE BUSINESS OFFICE.

JUST SIGN ON ANY OF THE SIGNATURE PAGES, SIR--WHEREVER YOU CAN FIND ROOM AMONG THE OTHER SIGNATURES.

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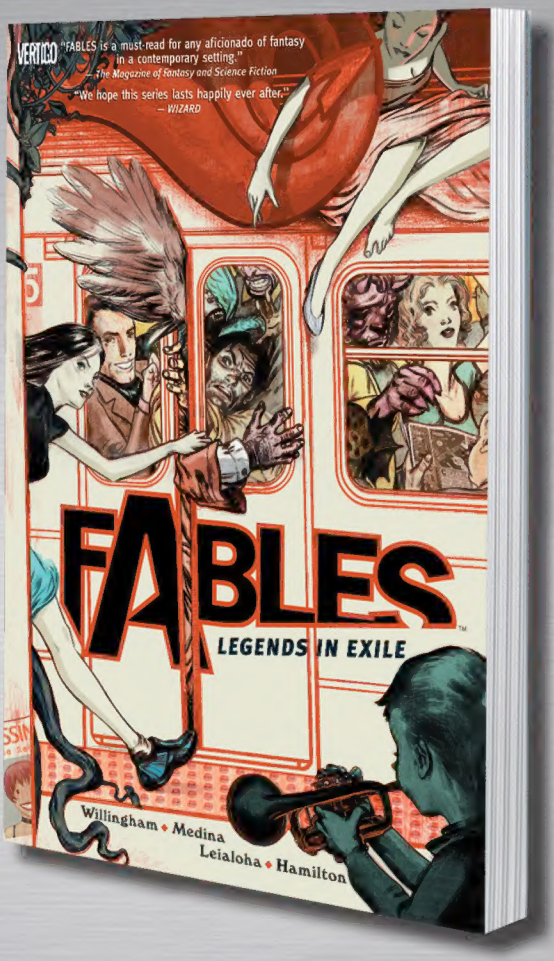

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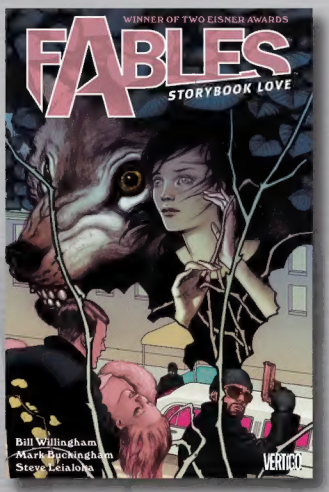

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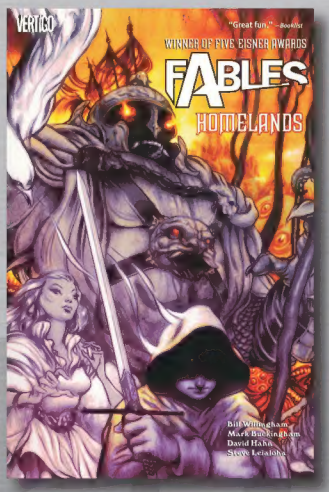

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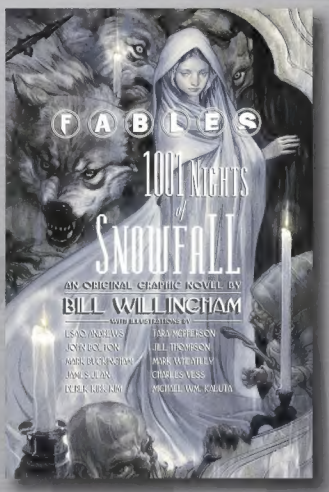
1001 NIGHTS OF SNOWFALL



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